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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a systematic strategy for developing oral skills from situational readings in a first year foreign language course. Aspects considered are: sequencing readings into the course, grammar component, vocabulary component, student preparation, outline of two day instructional treatments, the role of the teacher, and student tension. This approach leads students gradually from simple comprehension of situational reading material, often containing dialogue, through reinforcement of previously learned grammatical structures, expansion and review of students' active vocabulary, listening comprehension by means of paraphrasing, and pronunciation and intonation practice. The process culminates in a successful "Nacherzählung," or retelling of the story. Once the "Nacherzählung" has been completed, students are prepared to relate their own interests, experiences, or desires which are related to the situation depicted in the readings. Suggestions for the successful implementation of this strategy are contained in the summary remarks. (Author/AMH)

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Reading as a Basis for the Development of Oral Skills
in a First Year German Program

Presented: MLA Convention, December, 1977
A Special Session - Techniques For Teaching Reading
Skills In First And Second
Semester German Language Courses:
A New Reading

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Introduction

In a first year college language program designed to develop communicative competence, reading often becomes the stepchild of grammatical analysis, syntactic and morphological drilling, pronunciation practice, listening comprehension exercises, limited writing practice, and attempts to develop speaking proficiency. Student exposure to reading in the foreign language usually amounts to five or six textbook readings per semester with a few reading passages on tests added for good measure.

The Department of Germanic Languages of the University of Texas at Austin recently instituted a communication-oriented first year German program to complement a first year reading-for-comprehension track. To ensure that students in the four-skills communication mode receive adequate exposure to reading material without cutting into the time required to establish and develop communicative competence, the following schedule of readings was drawn up for the first two semester courses:

- first semester: twelve readings from the text, Deutsch 2000;
 twenty practice sight readings;
 two test sight readings, each five hundred words;
- second semester: twelve readings from text, Deutsch 2000;
 twenty practice sight readings;
 one outside reader, Perspektiven I;
 two test sight readings, each seven hundred words.

For each semester course the dozen readings from Deutsch 2000, which are graded situational dialogues of a non-literary nature, serve to offer reading material for homework, attention to vocabulary

acquisition, and a basis for developing listening, speaking, and writing skills by means of home-grown exercise materials and a multi-phased strategy for in-class interaction.

What follows is a description of the kinds of exercise materials employed and their rationale, the two day plan of study suggested to the students for each reading, and the role of the teacher during the classroom treatments of each text.

Grammar Component

Reading material is selected and sequenced into the course in such a way that grammatical features, both syntactic and morphological, will neither hamper nor frustrate the student in his reading. This is accomplished primarily through careful insertion of the readings into the course after the grammatical features contained in each reading have been mastered by means of grammar analysis and intensive drilling. (The textbook Modern German by Sparks and Vail is used to develop linguistic competence.) As a result, students are able to concentrate more on the semantic aspects, or content, of the reading selections and less on form. A grammar exercise is provided, however, to highlight and reinforce one or more grammatical features the students should already know. Through this exercise the students should appreciate that the grammatical structures they have been analyzing and drilling help to clarify the roles and relationships of the semantic units they encounter while reading. In addition, they should see that their study of grammar is truly important for both conveying and comprehending meaning accurately, and that it is not merely an academic, mechanistic exercise performed in a meaningless vacuum. The grammar exercise utilized for the Deutsch 2000 reading is typically of the recognition rather than production

sort, e.g., identifying past participles in the reading selection and supplying the infinitives from which they are derived, underlining pronouns and indicating the nouns to which they refer, circling all words in the dative case, or underlining all subjects found in the reading selection.

Vocabulary Component

Since the reading selections from Deutsch 2000 may be considered graded in difficulty and matched to the students' structural comprehension level, most of the remaining exercises deal with broadening and fortifying the students' stockpile of vocabulary items. The first vocabulary exercise attempts to develop the students' passive vocabulary and usually deals with the identification of a certain quantity of words related to a particular topic. For example, if students read about a group of businessmen meeting for lunch in a restaurant, they may be required to find a dozen words or expressions normally associated with a restaurant experience. This exercise assists the students in organizing the major learning objective, a successful Nacherzählung, or retelling of the story, because these are the words the students will have to acquire in order to verify their comprehension of the reading passage. An alternate or supplementary initial vocabulary exercise might consist of a study of compound words or of verbs with separable prefixes which appear in the reading. Such exercises help students break down complicated words into more manageable units and facilitates intelligent guessing.

The second, and principle, vocabulary exercise consists of a series of sentences, each of which presents a limited context drawn

from or based on the reading selection. These sentences may be taken directly from the reading passage, may be paraphrased sentences based on the reading, or they may be definitions or descriptions of concepts contained in the reading. For each sentence containing a blank, students must supply a word or expression found in the story which completes the meaning of that sentence. By so doing, students identify the words they must master actively for communicative purposes, namely, to answer the content questions contained in the next exercise, and, ultimately, to perform well during the Nacherzählung.

Comprehension Component

Students reconstruct the reading selection by writing answers to a series of chronologically ordered questions which essentially deal with the salient points of the reading, but also include some questions aimed at eliciting fine details. Ability to answer these questions is verification that the students have come to grips with the content of the story. In view of the preceding vocabulary exercises, answering the content questions accurately usually proves to be rather easy, and that does much to instill confidence in the students and gives them a genuine sense of accomplishment.

Lest the exercises thus far be applicable only to the context of the assigned reading, students are required to answer questions about themselves (Weitere Fragen) using the principle, or target, vocabulary contained in the story. For example, the students may be asked to recommend a good Mexican restaurant near campus, to speak about the people who work in a restaurant and explain what they do, to order a meal for two persons, or to describe what typically occurs from the customer's viewpoint from the moment he

enters the restaurant to the time he leaves. The purpose of these more personalized questions is to get the students to extrapolate what they have learned from the story to their own more immediate situation. The hope is that the learning process will be more meaningful, thereby increasing the chances that a greater amount will be learned and retained longer.

Viewed as a whole, all of the written exercises enable the student to attain both full understanding of the reading and a competency level of performance, while the upcoming classroom treatments of the reading selection help advance the students to a mastery performance level.

Student Preparation

Students receive a detailed study guide which outlines a suggested plan of attack for the Deutsch 2000 readings, explains the purpose of each of the exercises to be completed, and states clearly exactly what the students are expected to be able to do performance-wise when they enter the classroom. Since each reading selection is treated in two instructional periods, the study guide presents step-by-step directions for each day.

First Class Treatment

Students prepare at home for the first in-class treatment by reading the story aloud, if possible, three times at a comfortable pace and without the aid of a dictionary. They are advised to make as many intelligent guesses as possible based on the form of the printed word, its sound when pronounced, and the context in which unknown words appear. Above all, students are encouraged to trust

their guesses as long as their interpretation continues to make good sense. Next, they complete all of the exercises in the order in which they appear on the exercise sheets, i.e., grammar, then vocabulary, then content questions. Finally, students reread the story one more time and look up any words which may still pose a problem.

Second Class Treatment

Students are instructed to prepare for the second class period one day later by rereading the story aloud, if possible, three more times. By now the students should be totally familiar with both the story-line and the vocabulary needed to communicate their comprehension. Next, they review the exercises completed the evening before, noting where there may still be a doubt or problem. Finally, they are to retell the story to themselves without omitting any of the key points. Students are encouraged to visualize internally the plot of the reading selection, so as to create a non-verbal record of the story; thus, the remaining task is simply to interpret orally what they picture in their mind's eye, i.e., to narrate from the third person viewpoint. Because of the conversational nature of the Deutsch 2000 stories, most are written in the first and second persons. The Nacherzählung forces the student to modify his perception of the story, i.e., forces him to transform most of the dialogue to the narrative viewpoint, and ensures further that students will not memorize the stories or portions of them in an empty-headed manner.

The Role of the Teacher

When the teacher begins the in-class treatment of the reading selection he does so on the assumption that the students have read the story four times the night before, that they have completed the exercises in the prescribed fashion, and that they are prepared to participate in the classroom activities.

First, the teacher reads the story aloud and simultaneously mimes, paraphrases, restates, and illustrates on the blackboard anything he can. These techniques coupled with reading aloud, if carried out in a lively fashion, command the students' complete attention, reinforce what the students have learned the night before, and also help fill in any gaps in the students' comprehension of the story. It may seem that this step is unnecessary, given the degree of student preparation the prior evening; however, students are often "cold" when they enter the classroom and generally find the teacher's oral rendition of the story helpful in reorienting themselves to the reading. Furthermore, since the teacher relies heavily on paraphrasing at this point, the students listening skills are receiving attention and are hopefully sharpened.

The second step usually involves oral reading by the students, perhaps preceded by a limited amount of oral repetition of the more challenging phonological and intonational aspects of the particular reading selection. If the reading takes the form of a narrative, individual students may each read a paragraph. If the reading consists mostly of dialogue, then students take the roles of the speakers, either individually or chorally. Ideally, the teacher also stays involved in the student readings to ensure that the proper pace is maintained. Gross pronunciation errors are noted, corrected, and eliminated. Since the Nacherzählung is the acid test

of this strategy, and since it is to be rendered orally, this step is not at all superfluous, but rather, an important phase in the development of acceptable oral performance.

The last step of the first in-class treatment consists of going over the written exercises and the correction of student errors, either by the teacher, or preferably, by the students themselves.

The time required to complete these steps thoroughly varies depending on the length, type, and degree of sophistication and abstraction of the reading. Generally, between fifteen and twenty-five minutes are required. Considering their preparation the night before, students will have gone through the story more than a half dozen times by the end of the first class period, and they should be quite familiar with all facets of the reading. The preparation for the second in-class treatment marks the beginning of the mastery phase.

When the teacher commences with the second instructional treatment the next day, he does so assuming the students have reread the story the evening before and have reviewed the vocabulary and content question exercises. The first of the three Deutsch 2000 phases for the day is an oral reading of the text by the students, just as they had done on the previous day. This again serves to rejuvenate the story in the minds of the students, many of whom will not have had time to skim over it prior to class, and it provides another opportunity to refine pronunciation and intonation patterns.

The second step centers on the content questions, only this time the students are required to give oral responses in complete sentences with books closed and with no aids or "crutches" at their disposal.

The third activity is the culmination exercise, the Nacherzählung, whereby the entire class as a group reconstructs the story chronologically from memory. The class usually sits in a semi-circle, and each student, one after the other, must contribute a new fact or plot fragment from the reading. Students must remain alert at all times because, more often than not, some student has just mentioned the plot item they had planned to contribute. They must retain not only the story-line and be able to generate intelligent additions, they must also log what other students have said. Thus, students are continually compelled to modify what they perceive to be the balance, or remainder, of the story, and they must do the mental juggling instantaneously. After the class has exhausted all of the major points of the story, students may volunteer to fill in any gaps remaining in the narrative. Normally, all details are gleaned from the reading. Occasionally, two students will disagree over the sequence of events in the reading, in which case a debate ensues, other students chime in, and the teacher has the, in this case, delightful job of arbitrating. Personalized questions (Weitere Fragen) follow.

Student Tension

Because of the rather intense step-by-step preparation and review leading up to the Nacherzählung, students are usually relaxed and look forward to speaking. They are rarely nervous and tend to approach this activity more as they would a game rather than a high pressure performance test, and this holds true even for the one or two students in every class who shudder at the prospect of having to speak aloud in class. This lack of tension is due primarily to the fact that the exercises help the student build up his confidence. Those students who have prepared

diligently for the Nacherzählung find it invigorating, challenging, rewarding, and enjoyable. Only those who have sloughed off or who lack discipline are anxious about having to perform orally, because their lack of preparation is noticed instantly by teacher and students alike. Peer pressure rather than the teacher's admonitions usually brings delinquent students into line.

To ensure that the students orient themselves quickly to this approach and get off to a good start, the first two or three readings should be simple. As the readings become more involved and the students broaden their vocabulary base and deepen their understanding of the structure of the language, they may be requested to contribute two or three facts at a time during the Nacherzählung. If a student can sustain his speaking beyond the minimal performance expectation and maintain a chronological flow of events, he should be encouraged to do so. This keeps the Nacherzählung more interesting and more challenging for the students who have yet to participate in it and keeps alive the learning tension which must be present if real learning is to take place. Lest this learning tension become threatening or anxiety-producing, students must feel free to make errors without punitive action by the teacher, and the teacher must be sympathetic towards students who encounter difficulties despite their good efforts.

Summary

It should be obvious that situational readings with clear story lines and a wealth of concrete vocabulary lend themselves best to this approach at the elementary level. The total process is truly comprehensive: besides a serious attempt to broaden the students' vocabulary and ~~com~~ them to apply the rules of

grammar in a more thoughtful, meaningful, and realistic way, all four language skills are brought into play. It should be obvious that the approach is strenuous for all concerned. That the effort expended is rewarded is attested to by students and teachers who have used this approach as presented. Of course, this strategy can be modified and applied to any reading materials that are concerned both with a systematic introduction and reinforcement of vocabulary and structure. Furthermore, the Nacherzählung may be written if the teacher feels a need to provide more writing emphasis.

Every strategy or technique seems to have a flaw, either real or potential, and this approach also has an Achilles heel. The weak tendon seems to lie in assuming that students will prepare according to the guidelines set forth by the teacher. Since many students confess to spending minimal amounts of time on their foreign language courses, to lacking any real academic discipline, and to disdaining homework assignments, this strategy needs to be explained and sold to students. Usually, if the teacher takes the time to expose the rationale behind the technique and to state clearly exactly what his realistic level of expectation is with regards to student performance, students are quite willing to strive to attain the goal.

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